RTI PROJECT

Response to intervention (RTI) is a state initiative to improve instruction to all children. RTI is derived from the recent reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the law that provides the federal rules for special education. The intent of RTI is to reduce, perhaps by 70 percent, the number of students who are classified as pupils with disabilities. The key to helping all children learn is to believe in their abilities to learn and then to guide their learning through a systematic and intentional instruction and intervention. This requires continuous assessment and response to that evaluation through evidence-based intervention strategies. The assessments are screeners and progress monitoring evaluations. Based on what the teacher learns from the assessment, he or she plans a different treatment or intervention targeted to meet the child’s needs. There is a continuous cycle of assessment, instruction, and intervention. This allows the teacher to support the learner through evolving student performance data. This RTI model is needed to ensure that equal access to learning is available for every child.

In the past too many students were excluded from higher level thinking skills. These skills were reserved for the highest achieving students. Struggling learners were tracked into general or remedial coursework. They were deprived of the opportunity to be creative thinkers and collaborate with their high achieving peers (Schmidt & Burroughs). There was a widespread belief in education that not all students could learn complex material. Current research suggests that with appropriate instruction and intervention, all students are capable of learning and achieving at a high level of complexity.

According to Fisher and Frey, a core assumption of RTI is that all students can reach high levels of achievement if the system is willing (and able) to vary the amount of time students have to learn and the type of instruction they receive. Therefore, RTI builds on the concept of differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 2001) and understanding by design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). This new perspective of learning varies the instruction and time allowed and learning becomes a constant. In the past, instruction and time were constant and student learning varied. Response to intervention is a model of early intervention and assistance before students fall too far behind their peers. The students receive supplementary support, guided by regularly gathered assessment data through progress monitoring. This process replaces the pre-referral process that occurred before a student could be recommended for Special Education testing.

Data collection is the key element to this RTI process. The first step in this process is a school-wide screener. This screener allows the teachers to get a sense of who might need extra help in acquiring skills and content. This data allows collaboration across grade levels and departments, as well as with families. This data provides teachers and administrators with valuable information to examine staffing and paraprofessional considerations.

The whole process relies on a systematic collection of student performance data. This data provides a thumbnail sketch of each child so that appropriate instruction and interventions can be planned. Assessment has historically been a landmark of the learning process because it describes a student’s present understanding and provides useful feedback to the teacher on what’s working and what’s not (Fisher and Frey, 2010). Assessments that monitor student progress include formal assessments like standardized and criterion-referenced tests and curriculum-based measurements (CBMs). These assessments can be informal curriculum-based assessments (CBAs) like teacher observations, checklists, rubrics, and self-assessments. However, all of this data collection means nothing if the teachers don’t take the time to analyze the data. This is your early warning system to catch students that are falling between the cracks. During data analysis specific instruction and interventions are targeted to improve student learning. These visual displays of data are especially useful for holding collaborative conversations with colleagues, the family, and the student.

The next step in the process is to design research-based interventions for students who are struggling. Richard Allington, 2009, is an expert in this area for elementary reading instruction. He suggests that kindergarten and first graders get an additional 30 minutes of reading instruction daily with an expert. This time should not be spent with a paraprofessional, but with the reading specialist. Research shows that Reading Recovery, a one-to-one intervention, brought 80 to 85 percent of the students to grade-level proficiency in 12 to 20 weeks. The remaining 15 to 20 percent of these struggling readers may need an extended time with Reading Recovery. Elementary students in grades two through four may need an additional hour of reading intervention time in order to catch up to their peers.

In February 2009, the Institute of Education Sciences funded an initiative responsible for the What Works Clearinghouse. This site reviews the research on different programs, products, practices, and policies in education. They answer the question, “What Works in Education?” The goal is to provide educators with the information they need to make evidence based decisions. This site is extremely helpful for schools to plan worthwhile interventions for their students.

Interventions are divided into three tiers or levels of intensity. Tier 1 is the core instruction. Core Instruction is the first line of learning. It should be of high quality, research-based, and aligned to the common core standards. 75 to 85 percent of the students should make sufficient progress through core instruction alone.

Tier 2 provides supplemental interventions. It is an additional layer of support. This intervention should be designed for small group instruction and should compliment the core instruction. 10 to 15 percent of the students may need this additional support at one time or another. These interventions often last up to 20 weeks.

Intensive intervention is provided to students in Tier 3. Five to ten percent of the students will require an intensified approach that includes more time, lower teacher-student ratio (typically one-to-one), and individualized lessons that capitalize on the student’s strengths. An expert should administer interventions in this tier. These experts included curriculum specialists, special education teachers, coaches, speech-language pathologists, and intervention specialist.

It is at Tier 3 where strength-based teaching becomes extremely valuable. Thomas Armstrong (Educational Leadership, October 2012) writes about a neurodiversity perspective that can help educators create learning environments in which all students flourish. The neurodiversity paradigm suggests that we take the positive attitudes and beliefs that most people hold about biodiversity and cultural diversity and apply them to differences among human brains. Instead of viewing students with the mindset of a *disability*, we should view students with the mindset of *diversity*. We should be honoring and celebrating differences. And, we should base our teaching on the student’s assets and strengths rather than labels and weaknesses. For example, students with ADHD often are very creative. Students with learning disabilities often have higher than average entrepreneurial ability. Students with intellectual disabilities often have strengths related to emotion or personality. Many times technology can help give students with special needs more opportunities by using spell check, speech-to-text, and touch screen options. Focusing on strength-based teaching allows all students to achieve at high levels. The neurodiversity perspective provides teachers with a vision and philosophy that will foster all students to become who they were truly meant to be.

RTI is more than just an initiative that will come and go as the pendulum swings. RTI is a system that supports a vision for all American schools across the country. That vision is that all students are capable of learning at high levels. However, in order for that vision to come to fruition, the teachers and administrators in the school have to really believe it. It has to be more that a banner hanging in the entrance of the school. All students learning at high levels must be the philosophy that drives every decision during the course of the school day.

Quint Studer (2003) discusses the concept of hardwiring excellence. He suggest that people want to be part of organizations when they agree with the organization’s purpose, they believe that the work is worthwhile, and they feel that they can make a difference. He was writing about hospitals. However, this philosophy applies nicely to education. Our organization is our school, our school needs a system, and that system is Response to Intervention. With this system in place excellence becomes hardwired into the organization. RTI provides a structure and system to make every school in America hardwired with excellence.

Teaching every child and differentiating the instruction and interventions for every child is a massive job for classroom teachers. It requires a great deal of time, effort, energy, leadership, and a belief system that every child can learn complex material through best practices and systematic interventions. That is why I decided to tackle this project. I volunteered to lead our RTI team at Flambeau.

I participated in training throughout the year. I attended a two-day training from the RTI center on screeners and progress monitoring assessments. I also went to the RTI Summit in Green Bay Wisconsin. There I was able to listen to Dr. Anthony Muhammad on “Creating an Effective PLC Pyramid of Interventions” and “The Will to Lead: Developing Healthy School Cultures.” I also listened to Dr. Barbara Marinak on “All Roads Lead to Core: Challenges and Choices When Implementing RTI.”

I provided leadership as we developed our RTI plan by facilitating regular afterschool meetings with the RTI team. I facilitated two book studies on RTI. The first book was Enhancing RTI: How to Ensure Success with Effective Classroom Instruction and Intervention by Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey. The second book was Classroom Instruction that Works by Ceri B. Dean, Elizabeth Ross Hubbell, Howard Pitler, and BJ Stone. Both books dealt with current best practices to increase student achievement.

I also participated in a book study on Number Talks by Sherry Parish. This book provided the platform to really discuss how students learn Mathematics and what is the best way to teach this complicated subject. The book shares information about how children think about complex math problems. It is based on mental math strategies and estimation strategies. All of the teachers at Flambeau that were involved in this book study performed a book talk with their students. A book talk consists of a 5-15 minute mini lesson. I videotaped and observed many of these lessons. Then we convened back together and discuss what we learned about student thinking. The discussions were rich and powerful. This book really changed how we teach Mathematics at Flambeau.

As part of my leadership role, I kept the staff informed on information as I learned more about the RTI process. I used Professional Learning Community (PLC) time to collaborate with teachers and inform them of the direction that Flambeau is going in terms of RTI. I also presented a PowerPoint presentation to the entire elementary staff on RTI during our spring in-service for professional development.

In the spring, I visited a school that has a solid RTI structure in place for learners at all levels. I took six staff members to the Stanley-Boyd School District. This is a K-12 spotlight school about 50 minutes from Flambeau. We observed an intervention and enrichment class for first and second graders. We sat in on an RTI meeting at the fourth grade level with the teachers and the Title One specialist. We attended a question and answer session with the first grade teachers. They openly shared their journey process for implementing RTI. This was such a valuable day for my entire team!

Next, we evaluated our current structure for curriculum, decision-making, data analysis, and interventions. This evaluation was called a School Wide Implementation Review (SIR). It was done through the RTI Center. After we evaluated our current practices in Math and Reading, we had an expert from the RTI Center spend an afternoon with us to help us develop an action plan for implementation. Our action plan goal is to focus staff understanding of the universal screening, interventions, and the need for collaboration by the end of the 2014 school year. We created an assessment calendar, decided on our universal screener, came to a consensus on the details of our data boards, and picked some interventions to purchase for Title and Special Education teachers. We also discussed project-based learning for the 85 percent of the students that do not need interventions.

Flambeau is at the beginning stages of implementing RTI. At this point, we have inclusion, a PLC time once a month, an intervention block on the schedule, and some screeners that all elementary students are required to take. Part of my project was to evaluate these screeners that we are currently using, investigate some progress monitoring tools, and research interventions for Math and Reading. We made some solid decision for next year. We purchased STAR Enterprise, a new screener and progress monitoring system, for the elementary students. We also decided to train one of our reading specialists for Reading Recovery. This intervention will be used with first graders that are struggling in Reading.

I also created a four-year plan for implementation at Flambeau. Below is the vision for full implementation at Flambeau:

Year One (2011-2012): Building Purpose for RTI at Flambeau

Form our leadership team (Sonya, Sandy Brost, Laura S., Krystle, Sami, Erica, Megan P., Mandy, Ellen (CESA rep)

Go to RTI Summit

Do a book study on Enhancing RTI by Fisher and Frey

Set up monthly meeting for book study, discussion, training, and taking the SIR

Visit Demonstration Sites (Stanley-Boyd)

Select Tools for screening and progress monitoring

Beginning sending teachers and administrators to training

Complete a workable schedule for the start of implementation

Make a plan for grouping kids for intervention time

Make a list of interventions for teachers to use

Set up a protocol for PLC meetings to discuss grouping kids for intervention

Create data walls for all elementary grades

Review and analyze data

Allocate funds to support the process for the next 4 years

Data analysis of this year’s annual data

Determine a coach for the process. This coach will attend all of the coach training provided by RTI

Complete an action plan

Send coaches to (RtI Foundational Overview and RtI Framework Mapping)

Celebrate progress

Year Two (2012-2013): Building Infrastructure

Attend training on implementation

Write learning targets for Reading and Math (I can statements)

Align Math curriculum to the Common Core

Align Reading curriculum to the Common Core

Collect and analyze data/Revise action plan if needed

Determine interventions

Evaluate screening tool and progress monitoring tool

Start work on Common Assessments

Celebrate Progress

Year Three (2013-2014): Initial Implementation

Complete Common Assessments

Focus on staff practices

Determine decision rules for levels of support

Celebrate progress

Year Four (2014-2015): Full Implementation

Conduct integrity checks at all levels

Document process

Measure student outcomes

Evaluate interventions

Celebrate Progress

Our school has 64% of the students living at the poverty level. This reality contributes to another set of challenges for the learners in our school. We have 13.9% of our students identified as students with disabilities. In the past, these students received a different, less challenging curriculum. Now these students are all receiving the core instruction. However, proper training and appropriate scheduling have not been addressed. My leadership in RTI helped form a bridge between special education and regular education. I was involved in scheduling for the 2013-2014 school year. We have decided to rotate the intervention block throughout the day so that we can have access to specialists during that scheduled time. This will create an opportunities for our most struggling students to have access to the instructional resources that they depend on in order to make academic gains.

Finally, a celebration was needed to give value and appreciated to all of the hard work that went into this project during the school year. I personally wrote out thank you notes to all of the leadership team members. I invited the team to my home to celebrate our success on the last day of the school year. We celebrated a year of small steps toward full implementation of RTI. We have a shared vision for our students at Flambeau. No matter what the circumstances of their lives outside of the school walls, when they enter our school they are surrounded by support and expected to learn at high levels. RTI is making a difference for the student of the School District of Flambeau.

Competencies Met

*Leadership*; servant, moral, collaborative/organization vision/context for leadership/ public school history, philosophy/ change process/integrity, ethics, fairness/ safe, effective environment/ discrimination, diversity/ effective communication/

*Decision Making*; processes and theories/ role of power and influence/ consensus/ motivational theories/ long-range strategic plans, problem solving strategies/ fairness and ethics/ change process/ conflict resolution models/

*School Law*; right, responsibility of students and staff/ attendance/ discrimination/ teacher liability/ special education/ ethics and law/

*Facilities*; plans and budgets/ technology/

*Human Resources*; staff development programs/ motivation and needs/ needs of diverse populations/ community support/

*Curriculum and Instruction*; psychology of learning / Philosophy and history of curriculum/ standards/ planning and development/ implementation/ continuous assessment/ research and best practices/ educational technology/ tests and measurements/

*Administration of Curriculum*; supervision/ high academic standards/ best practice and technology/ evaluation and student assessment/ instructional challenges/ role of technology/ student and instructional evaluation/ teacher evaluation and staff development/ RTI

*Finance*; data and decision making/ inequalities: fund and opportunity/

*School Community*; school as internal organization/ integrated services/ culture, ethnicity attitudes/ sensitivity to families/ interpersonal relationships/ public relations/

*Research*; role in education/ quantitative types/ quantitative data/ qualitative types/ qualitative data/ action research/ data reporting/ evaluating, applying/ program evaluation/

*Coordinating Special Programs*; purpose/ student qualifications/ relationship to special and regular education/ organization of programs/ planning/ curriculum/ evaluation/ role of family and ethnicity/

*Learner Centered Leadership*; school culture and climate/ curriculum development/ supervision and evaluation/ using test data/ beginning teachers/ teacher standards/ celebrating accomplishments /communicate vision and mission/ long range strategic plans/

*Principalship*; manager vs. leader/ role in community/ role of finances/ school reform/ communication and technology/ child development and learning/

*Advanced Program Planning and Curriculum*; k-12 whole curriculum/ elementary, middle, high school curriculum/ director or instruction role/ making curriculum decisions/ birth to adult human growth development/ evaluation of curriculum/ role of standardized tests/ interpreting standardized tests/ teacher made tests to report progress/

*Implementing Standard Based Education*; history of standards based education/ setting standards accountability/ federal and state requirements/ grade level considerations/ assessment relative to standards/ report student progress on standards/ in-servicing on standard based education/ standards based classroom/

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